Z A Y T U N A   I N S T I T U T E

THE ETHICAL STANDARD OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD ﷺ

By Imam Zaid Shakir *February 22nd, 2006*

The ongoing "Cartoon Crisis" raises several issues. One of the most important is the incumbency of seeing the ongoing crisis as an opportunity to educate people in the West about our blessed Prophet, peace and blessings of God be upon him (ﷺ)[1]. Along those lines, one of the greatest things we can do is teach about the exalted ethical standard introduced by our Prophet ﷺ. That ethical standard is the bedrock of his mission and message.

In an age of instantaneous communications and globalized media it is important for Muslims to reaffirm our commitment to the prophetic ethical ideal. Under prevailing conditions, the sensationalized excesses of some Muslims, excesses that contradict the ethical teachings of our Prophet ﷺ are often used to distort the perception of Islam in the West. That distortion in turn helps to create prejudiced attitudes towards Islam and Muslims.

I would argue that the images that insinuate a connection between our Prophet ﷺ and terrorism are more informed by the hijackings, kidnappings, beheadings, and cold-blooded murder of unsuspecting civilians, all of which characterize many of our recent political struggles, than to any inherent biases or prejudices among the people of Europe and America. If we Muslims are going to contribute to changing how Islam and our Prophet ﷺ are viewed in the West, we are going to have to change what we ourselves are doing to contribute to the caricaturing of Islam. That change can only be affected by sound knowledge coupled with exalted practice, and reviving the lofty ethical ideal of our beloved Prophet ﷺ.

> *You will surely be tested in your wealth and your lives. And you will hear from those given the scriptures before you and from the idolaters much abuse. If you patiently persevere, and remain mindful [of God], surely in this is a manifestation of firm resolve.* [Al-Qur'an 3:186]

An examination of the ethical standard of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ relevant to the current crisis, must begin by looking at certain critical Qur'anic verses. We will begin by examining the above passage. This verse was preemptively revealed as consolation to the Prophet ﷺ and his followers in anticipation of the abuse that would be heaped upon them from parties amongst the Jews, Christians, and idolaters. In the face of that abuse a course of action was prescribed; namely, that they patiently endure those abuses and remain mindful of God in the face of the negative propaganda that would increase as their worldly power grew. The implication of that course of action is beautifully captured in the words of the great 18th Century Turkish scholar Imam Ismail al-Burusawi in his commentary of the Qur'an. He says, "God is going to treat you as one undergoing a test in order to show your mettle in persevering in the truth and righteous deeds."[2]

Imam Burusawi then summarizes one of the main lessons of the verse:

> You should know that reciprocating vile deeds with vile deeds would only increase vileness. Therefore, the command to patiently endure abusive transgressions minimizes those things that bring harm to the worldly realm. Similarly, the command to remain mindful of God minimizes those things that jeopardize the life hereafter. Hence, this verse combines the etiquettes essential for [success in] this world and the next.[3]

It is interesting to note that this verse was revealed after the migration to Medina.

Therefore, it was a pronouncement of state policy for the nascent Muslim polity. The strategic benefits of this policy would be realized years later in the bloodless conquest of Mecca. That conquest was made possible in large part because the Prophet ﷺ did not cultivate a spirit of vengeance and retaliation in his followers. Nor did he cultivate in them a deep hatred for the people he was commissioned to call to Islam. It was on the basis of this spirit that he was able to fully accept and welcome into the fold of Islam his bitterest enemies; Abu Sufyan, ʻAmr bin al-ʻAs, Khalid bin al-Walid, Ikrima bin Abi Jahl, and many others.

> *Therefore, proclaim openly what you have been ordered [to convey], and turn away from the idolaters. We will suffice you against those who mock you. Those who make another god with God; soon they will know. We know that your heart is greatly grieved by what they say. Glorify the praises of your Lord and be amongst those dutifully and consistently prostrating [unto Him]. And worship your Lord until death comes to you.* [Al-Qur'an 15:94-99]

This group of Qur'anic verses revealed in Mecca also involves consolation for the Prophet ﷺ in the face of his people's abuse. The gist of this passage is that God will assume the responsibility for taking revenge against his tormentors. The Prophet ﷺ is commanded to turn away from his enemies, leaving God to deal with them. Abu Su'ud, a 16th Century Qur'anic scholar, comments on this instruction, "That is to say, do not pay any attention to what they say, do not be concerned with them, and do not begin to think of vengeance against them."[4] It is mentioned that these verses were revealed concerning five of the notables of the Quraysh who were especially abusive towards the Prophet ﷺ. God dispatched the Angel Gabriel to deal with them and they all died terrible deaths, with the exception of Al-Aswad bin al-Muttalib, who lived, but went blind after Gabriel pointed to his eyes.[5] The Prophet ﷺ is instructed to proclaim the message, to forge on in his work of propagation, and to deepen his devotion and remembrance of God. As for the fate of his enemies, God would deal with them.

He would be reminded years later that his actions would never affect the fate of those opposing him. God mentions in that regard:

> *You have nothing to do with the outcome of their affair [O, Muhammad!] Whether He accepts repentance from them, or punishes them, they are indeed wrongdoers.*
> [Al-Qur'an 3:128]

In this verse, God reminds His Prophet ﷺ that He is in control. The control of the affair of the universe is with Him. As for the Prophet ﷺ, his job is to convey the message, and not to burden himself by worrying about the ensuing outcome. In conveying the message, the Prophet ﷺ is instructed to adopt the highest ethical standard, a standard that is established by God, not by himself, nor any other human agent. God says:

> *Surely, you are on an exalted standard of character.* [Al-Qur'an 68:4]

ʻA'isha, the blessed wife of the Prophet, may God be pleased with her, was asked to describe the character of the Prophet ﷺ. She responded:

> He was not foul in his actions, nor in his speech; he was not boisterous in the marketplace; he did not retaliate in kind to vile acts perpetrated against him; rather he pardoned and forgave."[6]

This tradition involves a detailed explanation of a more general description given by ʻA'isha of the Prophet ﷺ. She mentioned that his character was an embodiment of the Qur'an.[7] In other words, his character was godly, for the Qur'an is the eternal Speech of God.

Here we should pause and reflect on the mission of the Prophet ﷺ. He mentioned, describing that mission, "I was only sent to perfect good character."[8] Consistent with what we mentioned above, we could interpret the tradition to mean, "I was only sent to make people more godly." This idea that Islam is a path to godliness has to be stressed in these days when many Muslims view it strictly as a path to worldliness. That worldliness has contributed to the Muslim community, generally speaking,

falling ever further down the slippery slope of political expediency. Political involvement is certainly a critical aspect of Islam. However, political expediency cannot provide *ex post facto* determinants of our values and principles. Those have been determined, *a priori*, by God.

This idea of godliness is not something strange in our religion. The 12th century jurist, Al-'Izz bin 'Abd as-Salaam, one of the greatest latter day scholars, mentions in his book *Shajara al-Ma'arif w'al-Ahwal*:

> No one is suitable for the supporting friendship of The Judge (Almighty God) until he rectifies himself with the etiquettes of the Qur'an, and he adorns himself with the Attributes of the Most Merciful, to the extent humanly possible. He (God) is most excellent and He commands [His servants] with excellence. He is most generous and He commands generosity. He beautifies and He commands beautification. He is the Benefactor and He commands extending benefit. He relieves and He commands bringing relief. He is All Forgiving and He commands forgiveness. He conceals faults and He commands the concealment of faults. He repairs and restores and He commands restoration...[9]

Enduring trials, tribulations, and bearing abuses are the crucibles through which the ability to move towards this state of godliness is forged. Because the Prophet ﷺ is our leader in guiding us to this standard, in word and deed, no one was more tried or abused than he. He could not order anyone to adopt these characteristics, until he himself had adopted them, just as he could not urge the arduous traversing of the obstacles leading to them until he himself had traveled that difficult road. It is by traveling that road that we turn away from the creation and orient ourselves towards the Creator.

> *Not equal are good and evil. Repel [evil] with what is best; you will unexpectedly see one with whom you had enmity become an intimate friend.* [Al-Qur'an 41:34]

The Prophet's ﷺ cousin and close companion, Ibn 'Abbas, may God be pleased with him, is related as saying concerning this verse:

> God commands the believers with patience in the presence of anger; forbearance in the face of ignorant acts; and pardoning when offended. If they do that God will protect them from Satan and subdue their enemies.[10]

Imam Al-Burusawi mentions in his commentary:

> Not equal are good character traits and vile ones in the reward they incur and the outcome [they lead to]. If you patiently persevere in the face of their abuses and ignorance, leave off pursuing revenge against them, and pay no attention to their foolishness, you merit exaltation in this world, and a great reward in the next. They [your enemies] will merit the opposite. Do not allow their boldness in entertaining vile character traits prevent you from engaging in good ones.[11]

No single verse could better embody the spirit of Islamic ethics [Al-Qur'an 41:34]. Not only does it prescribe a lofty course of action, it also shows how that action, far from leading to worldly weakness, is a source of worldly strength and exaltation. However, if one is not in touch with God, one cannot perceive the veracity of His promise, or the scope of His power. Regardless of our perceptions, God has the power to transform our enemies into friends. However, in a worldly sense, we unleash that power through principled, ethically lofty behavior. As the verse after the one being discussed proceeds to remind us:

> *No one is granted this lofty state except those who patiently persevere; and no one is granted it except the possessor of a great portion.*
> [Al-Qur'an 41:35]

Imam Burusawi describes that *great portion* as:

> [...a great portion] of personal virtues and spiritual strength. Preoccupation with revenge only exists because of the soul's weakness, and its propensity to be affected by external stimuli. When the soul is strong in its essence it is not affected by external stimuli. When it is not affected by such

stimuli, it is easy for it to bear abuses and not be preoccupied with revenge.[12]

One of the great losses we suffer as Muslims when we make politics our first priority is that we lose sight of the fact that our Prophet ﷺ has introduced to the world the most refined system of spirituality and ethics known to humanity. Inaugurating and laying the foundation for the perpetuation of that system was at the heart of his mission. It is only on the basis of that system that any meaningful worldly accomplishments are possible. It is therefore fitting that the Prophet ﷺ proclaimed, "I have only been sent to perfect noble character."[13]

Some Ethical Sayings of the Prophet ﷺ [14]

The following is a collection of some of the ethical sayings of the Prophet ﷺ. They are selected from the work of the great master of prophetic tradition, Ibn Abi ad-Dunya. He mentions these sayings in his book, *Makarim al-Akhlaq* (Noble Character Traits).[15] They are related without comment to encourage personal reflection on their deeper significance for our current condition.

Ibn 'Abbas relates that the Messenger of God ﷺ said, "Whoever would be pleased to be the noblest of people, let him be mindful of God. Whoever would be pleased to be the strongest of people, let him trust in God. And whoever would be pleased to be the wealthiest of people, let him be more confident in what God possesses than with what he finds in his own hand.[16]

Sahl bin Sa'd relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Surely, God is munificent, He loves munificence. He likewise loves noble characteristics and hates pettiness."[17]

Anas bin Malik relates that he heard the Prophet ﷺ say, "Noble characteristics are among the actions of those destined for Paradise."[18]

'Uqba bin 'Amir relates that the Prophet ﷺ said to him, "O, 'Uqba! Shall I inform you of the loftiest characteristic of the denizens of this world and the next? Join relations with those who break them with you. Give freely to those who deny you. And pardon those who oppress you."[19]

Abu Hurayra relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Seek exaltedness with God." It was said, "What does that involve, O, Messenger of God?" He replied, "Join relations with those breaking them with you. Give freely to those who deny you. And forbear with those offending you out of ignorance."[20]

'Amr bin al-'As relates that he heard the Prophet ﷺ say, "There are forty character traits, the loftiest of them is to lend someone your ewe [to benefit from its milk]. No one acts on any one of them, anticipating its reward, affirming the promise associated with it, except that God enters him into Paradise because of it."[21]

Ibn 'Umar relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Two traits are among the characteristics of the Arabs and are religious pillars, you are on the verge of leaving them: shyness, and noble character."[22]

'Amr bin 'Abasa relates that he asked the Prophet ﷺ, "What is faith?" He replied, "Patience and a magnanimous spirit." 'Amr then asked, "What is the best form of faith?" He replied, "Good character."[23]

Anas bin Malik relates that the Prophet ﷺ never confronted anyone in a manner disliked by that person.[24]

Sa'id bin al-Musayyib relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "A paucity of shyness is a form of disbelief."[25]

'Imran bin Husayn relates that he heard the Prophet ﷺ say, "Shyness embodies all good." Al-'Ala bin Ziyad responded, saying, "We find in our books that it involves weakness." 'Imran rejoined angrily, "I am relating to you what the Messenger of God said and you are qualifying it with your books!"[26]

Malik bin Dinar relates that 'Umar bin al-Khattab said, "Whoever has a lack of shyness will have a lack of scrupulousness. Whoever has a lack of scrupulousness will have a dead heart."[27]

Anas bin Malik relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Every faith community has a distinguishing characteristic. The distinguishing characteristic of Islam is shyness."[28]

'Imran bin Husayn relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Surely, shyness only brings good."[29]

'Abdullah bin 'Amr bin al-'As relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Surely, the best of companions with Allah are the best of them with their companions, and the best of neighbors with Allah are the best of them with their neighbors."[30]

'A'isha relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Gabriel continued to admonish me concerning the neighbor until I thought he would make him an heir."[31]

Abu Shurayh relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him treat well his neighbor."[32]

'A'isha relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Good neighborliness, maintaining blood ties, and good character are the basis of civility, and they enhance civilization."[33]

Anas bin Malik relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "A man whose neighbor is not safe from his wickedness will not enter Paradise."[34]

This presentation concludes with a selection of traditions concerning the rights of neighbors for we have all become neighbors in the "Global Village." As the ongoing "Cartoon Crisis" illustrates, what happens in one corner of the village affects us all. The current situation was initiated when the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* chose to disregard the rules of civility governing relations between neighbors in that village. Those rules are nowhere better articulated than by the Danish Penal Code which states that any person "threatening, insulting, or degrading a group of persons on account of their race, color, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation, shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment…" Clearly, the editor of the newspaper made a conscious decision to break the law prevailing in his home country.

However, now that the transgression has occurred, how should we respond? Do we answer with transgressions of our own, as some have done? Or do we all redouble our efforts to demonstrate to people, in the clearest terms possible, what Islam and the teachings of our Prophet ﷺ are all about. Clearly, the latter option is far more desirable, productive, and closer to the spirit of the prophetic teachings.

Conclusion

During the Battle of Uhud, the Prophet's ﷺ incisor was broken. His lower lip was ruptured, and he had a bleeding wound on his forehead. He was constantly drying up the blood to keep it from falling upon the ground, saying, "If any of this blood falls on the ground, Divine Punishment would descend upon them (the Quraysh)." The situation weighed on the Companions, and they implored, "Why do you not pray against them?" He replied, "I have not been sent to damn people. I have been sent as a caller and a mercy. O, God! Forgive my people for they know no better."[35]

These are glimpses of the character of our noble Prophet ﷺ. As he said, he was sent as a caller and a mercy. That call and mercy should be available to all people, even in the West. The mercy that his mission embodied hinged on his uncompromising commitment to the ethical standard God established him on. Hence, his ethical standard made the gift of his mercy possible.

Now is the time for us to share the great gift of our Prophet ﷺ and his guidance to the world. He described himself as a gift of mercy. His mercy led him to be deeply concerned about the guidance of his people, even when they were opposing him in the dastardliest ways. We should be just as concerned about the guidance of our own people, even though some of them may be opposing us. And we should try at all costs to avoid anything that would prejudice our people against Islam because of our own actions. As our Prophet ﷺ instructed us, "Call people and do not repulse them."[36]

These are dark days when all peoples are abandoning their loftier ethical standards in the name of the amoral pursuit of worldly power. Let us be the people who pursue power through the strength of our commitment to our ethical standard. This is the sure basis of true ascension in the world and enduring esteem among nations. As the great bard of Egypt, Ahmad Shawqi, reminded us, "Communities are none other than the ethical code existing along with them; when that ethical code goes, they will soon follow."

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1 The Arabic inscription ﷺ, which translates as "peace and blessings of God be upon him," is a short prayer that Muslims recite after mentioning the name of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Such prayers are recited after the names of all recognized Prophets (i.e. Moses, Abraham, Jesus) and others figures considered worthy of veneration and respect in the Islamic tradition.

2 Imam Isma'il Al-Burusawi, *Tafsir Ruh al-Bayan* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, 2001/1421), 2:172.

3 Ibid. 2:173.

4 Abu Su'ud Muhammad bin. Muhammad al-Hanafi, *Tafsir Abi Su'ud* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Ilmiyya, 1999/1419), 4:36.

5 Ibid. 4:37.

6 Imam Abu 'Isa Muhammad bin 'Isa at-Tirmidhi, *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* (Riyadh: Dar As-Salaam, 1999/1420), p. 465, no. 2016.

7 See Imam Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir at-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997/1418), 12:179-180, nos. 34559, 34560, 34561, 34562.

8 Imam Abu Bakr al-Husayn bin 'Ali al-Bayhaqi, *As-Sunan al-Kubra* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994/1414), 10:323, no. 20782.

9 Imam 'Izz ad-Din 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd as-Salaam as-Sulami, *Shajara al-Ma'arif w'al-Ahwal* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1998/1419), p. 67.

10 Imam Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, *Ad-dur al-Manthur fi Tafsir bil-Ma'thur* (Beirut: Dar al-Ihya at-Turath al-Islami, 2001/1421), 7:282.

11 Al-Burusawi, 8:351.

12 Ibid. 8:353.

13 Al-Bayhaqi, 10:323, no. 20782.

14 For an excellent compilation of general ethical sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, see Shaykh al-Amin 'Ali Mazrui, *The Content of Character: Ethical Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*, trans. Hamza Yusuf (London: Sandala LLC, 2005).

15 Imam Ibn Abi ad-Dunya, *Makaram al-Akhlaq* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Qur'an, n.d.).

16 Ibid. p. 19.

17 Ibid. p. 19.

18 Ibid. p. 20.

19 Ibid. p. 22.

20 Ibid. p. 23.

21 Ibid. p. 25.

22 Ibid. p. 29.

23 Ibid. p. 31.

24 Ibid. p. 37.

25 Ibid. p. 37.

26 Ibid. pp. 37-38.

27 Ibid. p. 40. This type of narration, related directly from Umar, the second Caliph, after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, is referred to as *Hadith Mawquf*. It is mentioned by Ibn Abi Dunya in his collection. We have retained it even though it is not related directly from the Prophet ﷺ.

28 Ibid. p. 41.

29 Ibid. p. 41.

30 Ibid. p. 92.

31 Ibid. p. 101.

32 Ibid. p. 102.

33 Ibid. p. 103.

34 Ibid. p. 106.

35 Quoted in 'Abdullah Siraj ad-Din, *Muhammad Rasulullah* (Halab, Syria: Maktaba Dar al-Falah, 1990/1410), p. 254.

36 Imam Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Sidon, Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 2005/1426), p. 532, no. 3038.